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ABSTRACT

Motivational and cognitive aspects of children's reports of an event to which they were the only "witness" and the prime "suspect" were examined. Subjects were 67 children of 3 to 10 years of age. After a test and play session to assess the children's receptive vocabulary and their understanding of the term "believe," each child was asked to perform a task with a collection of figures constructed from play dough. During a brief period in which the child was left alone, a man entered, broke one of the figures (a snake), and left hurriedly, and left behind some books he had brought with him. In semistructured interviews, questions such as "What happened to the snake?" and "What did you do?" were asked of each child. Other questions assessed the child's perceptions of his or her believability, understanding of the utility of corroborating evidence, and knowledge of legal concepts. The majority of the children accurately reported the way in which the figure was broken. Children's expectations that they would be believed by unfamiliar adults decreased with age. Older children were more likely than younger children to corroborate their stories by describing the man and mentioning his books. Children younger than age 7 had little familiarity with, or understanding of, legal concepts. Adults' perceptions of the credibility of child witnesses, developmental influences on children's perceptions of their credibility, and implications for children's court testimony are discussed. (AC)

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Do Children Believe in Their Own Believability?

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Abstract

Motivational and cognitive aspects of children's reports of an event to which they were the only "witness" and the prime "suspect" were examined. Sixty-seven children, ages 3 to 10, were each asked to add to a collection of figures constructed from play dough. The child was briefly left alone, and a man entered, "accidentally" broke one of the figures on display, and left hurriedly, "forgetting" his books. Subsequent questioning by the experimenter and the collection "owner" was designed to assess children's perceptions of their own believability, their understanding of the utility of evidence corroborating testimony, and their knowledge of legal concepts. The results indicate that children's expectations that they will be believed by unfamiliar adults decrease with age. However, the majority of children, regardless of their expectations of believability, accurately reported how the figure was broken. Older children were more likely than younger to corroborate their stories by describing the confederate and mentioning his books, and children younger than age 7 had little familiarity with and even less understanding of legal concepts. No relationship was found between legal knowledge and expectations of believability. Implications for children's testimony are discussed.

Much of what determines a child's credibility may depend on socially accepted stereotypes of children's cognitive abilities and trustworthiness. As Undeutsch (1984) points out, witness credibility is based on juror perceptions of both a witness' willingness to tell the truth (motivation) and capacity to accurately and completely recall details of an event (cognition). Recent survey research reveals that in professional and lay opinion alike children are presumed to lack the cognitive abilities necessary for complete and accurate recall (e.g., to be prone to memory distortions) and to be more suggestible than adults (e.g., Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987; Ross, Dunning, Toglia, & Ceci, 1989). On the other hand, survey respondents maintain that children's testimony, relative to an adult's, is likely to be equally or more sincere (e.g., Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987; Ross, et al., 1989), a theory possibly based on the assumptions that children are inherently honest and too unsophisticated to knowingly give false testimony. In accordance with these expectations, a child's credibility may be underestimated on the one hand and overestimated on the other. While studies that go beyond survey research in their exploration of juror perceptions of children's credibility indicate that these stereotypes can be overcome, the results are inconsistent and controversial.

Adults' Perceptions of Child Witnesses' Credibility

Studies examining the influence of age on mock-juror ratings of witness credibility reveal mixed results. Goodman, Golding, Helgeson, Haith, and Michelli (1987) asked subject-jurors to rate the credibility of an eyewitness whose age varied from 6- to 10- to 30-years and to estimate the defendant's degree of guilt. Regardless of the type of trial (vehicular homicide or murder) or the way it was presented (written description or videotape), the 6-year-old eyewitness was rated as less credible than the two older witnesses. In addition, there was a relationship between eyewitness credibility and guilt ratings only when the eyewitness was an adult, suggesting that jurors may have relied more heavily on corroborating testimony of other witnesses to judge the guilt or innocence of the defendant when a young eyewitness testified.

Similar results were obtained by Goodman, Bottoms, Herscovici, and Shaver (1989) who examined juror impressions of 3- to 6-year-old child victim/witnesses' videotaped testimony regarding receiving a shot from a nurse who supposedly had been accused of malpractice in connection with the incident. Although one 4-year-old was actually more accurate than all the older children, jurors rated this child's testimony as "very uncredible." Both the perceived accuracy and credibility of witness' testimony increased as witness age increased.

Perceptions of witness' credibility have been shown to be related to a number of factors other than age. Leippe and Romanczyk (1989) manipulated the strength of each witness' testimony, which was either weak, ambiguous, or strong, as well as witness age. The 6-year-old's testimony was rated as the least credible, and the 30-year-old's as the most credible. There was no overall effect of eyewitness age on jury verdicts, but a strong case with an adult eyewitness brought in a guilty verdict 100% of the time while the same case with a child eyewitness did so only 58.3% of the time. Leippe and Romanczyk (1989) suggest that, for an adult, eyewitness testimony may have an aggrandizing effect on an otherwise strong case but "be unable to pervade an armor of suspicion toward children's testimony" (Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989, p. 116). In a second experiment, these researchers varied the consistency of eyewitness reports. Regardless of age, witnesses with consistent testimony were rated as more credible than inconsistent witnesses. Additionally, a consistent 6-year-old witness received the highest credibility rating while an inconsistent 6-year-old witness received the lowest, suggesting that "a 6-year-old who conforms to a negative stereotype may lose credibility...whereas one who behaves 'better' than he or she should may gain in credibility, even beyond an older child or adult..." (Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989, p. 119).

Wells, Turtle, and Luus (1989) similarly found that subject-jurors tended to strongly believe eyewitnesses of any age who were perceived as confident, and confident witnesses (regardless of their actual accuracy) received higher accuracy estimates. Nigro, Buckley, Hill, and Nelson (1989) found that a child using a powerful speaking style was rated as more credible than a powerful adult, and a child with a powerless style was also more credible than a powerless adult. Furthermore, while speech style did not impact guilt ratings when the eyewitness was an adult, a "powerful" child brought in the highest guilt ratings, and a "powerless" one the lowest.

The type of case being tried may also significantly affect the perceived credibility of a witness. Using a case that involved a drug transaction, Ross et al. (1989) found the 8-year-old witness was rated by jurors as the most credible, the elderly (74-year-old) witness was rated as moderately credible, and the young adult (21-year-old) as least credible. Perhaps jurors apply different standards to each witness' testimony, and the 8-year-old witness performed at a better than expected level. However, Ross et al. (1989) point out that the seeming about-face in juror perceptions of children's credibility may have been due to the subject-matter of the trial itself, which may have led subject-jurors to concentrate more on "inherent" honesty and the

witnesses' possible involvement in the crime than their cognitive ability.

Goodman et al. (1989) used a case description of an alleged sexual assault in which the victim was described as a female either 6-, 14-, or 22-years-old. Perceived credibility of the witness was inversely related to increased age of the witness. Subject-jurors' comments about witnesses' cognitive abilities ("I don't think her reasoning would be that advanced to plot out the sexual incident...") and honesty ("Usually children tell the truth") conformed to well-known stereotypes (Goodman et al., 1989, p. 16). It appears that in some instances both positive (perceived honesty) and negative (lack of cognitive abilities) juror bias may work together to actually enhance a child's credibility. In fact, the defendant was more likely to receive a guilty verdict in the 6-year-old condition than in the 14- or 22-year-old condition.

The results of a study reported by Duggan, Aubrey, Doherty, Isquith, Levine, and Scheiner (1989) support Goodman et al.'s (1989) speculation that children's perceived lack of cognitive abilities may in some cases actually enhance their credibility. Duggan et al. (1989) examined 5-, 9-, and 13-year-old children's credibility in a mock sexual abuse trial. Subject-jurors attributed more responsibility for the incident to the older

witness and emphasized the sexual naivete of young children. The 13-year-old's testimony was rated as the least credible.

While studies of adult-jurors' perceptions increase our knowledge of some of the factors influencing a child's credibility, other, perhaps equally important influences, remain virtually ignored. For example, children's knowledge of and attitudes toward the legal system may play an active role in their courtroom performance and, thus, in juror perceptions. Exploration of children's legal knowledge, although limited, does demonstrate increasing knowledge of legal terms with increasing age (Saywitz & Jaenicke, 1987; Saywitz, 1989; Flin, Stevenson, & Davies, 1989; Warren-Leubecker, Tate, Hinton, & Ozbek, 1989). In addition, research examining children's social/cognitive perceptions of the legal system reveal that, in general, children express negative feelings about the prospect of being a witness. Children younger than 10 maintain that only "bad people" go to court and say that they are fearful of being sent to jail (Flin et al., 1989). Further, children have expressed doubts about a child's credibility relative to an adult's, and have little knowledge of factors influencing credibility (Warren-Leubecker, et al., 1989).

Developmental Influences on Credibility Perceptions

Although studies of adults' perceptions of child witness

credibility are critically important since only adults actually serve on juries, children's perceptions of their own credibility may also significantly impact their testimony, and, in turn, the way it is perceived by adults. On the one hand, if children doubt their own credibility, they may fail to disclose crimes against them; or they may add, change, or omit details in their reports of an event in an effort to make their story seem more believable. On the other hand, if children are overconfident in their believability, they may make little attempt to convince others of the truth of their report, including the jury members who may ultimately decide on their veracity.

What factors might affect the development of children's perceptions of their own credibility? First, in addition to greater knowledge of the legal process, older children have more adult-like understanding of the concepts of "truth" and "lying." If children of various ages have differential understanding of the concept of truth, it would certainly affect their perceptions of whether others, or themselves, are telling the truth. For example, preschoolers appear to believe that any false statement is a lie even if its speaker fully believes the statement to be true. Unlike older children and adults, young children do not take a speaker's intents and beliefs into account when judging the truthfulness of a statement (Strichartz & Burton, 1990).

However, children as young as age 4 correctly label a false statement an "untruth" even if the statement is prompted by a parent or made in an effort to cover up for a friend (Haugaard, Reppucci, Laird, & Nauful, 1991). Although the concepts of "truth" and "lying" may undergo further refinement well into the school years, "most children do not have definitions that would disqualify them as competent witnesses" (Haugaard et al., 1991, p. 265).

Moreover, perspective-taking abilities that may be necessary for assessing one's own credibility in the eyes of others also increase with age. Selman (1980) suggests that most children under the age of seven years cannot really put themselves in another's place or see their own thoughts or behavior from another person's perspective. Children older than seven are better able to anticipate others' reactions to their behavior. Dixon & Moore, 1990, find a similar developmental progression in children's perspective-taking ability, however, individual differences may be a more important index of this ability than age alone. In fact, Dixon and Moore found that even some preschoolers demonstrate a higher level of perspective-taking ability than Selman would have expected.

Further, older children possess better metacognitive skills (e.g., Wellman, 1985), including greater knowledge of their own

memory limitations. Although even five-year-olds are cognizant of some memory drawbacks, e.g., that briefly presented information may be forgotten, and that long retention intervals may decrease memory certainty, they often overestimate their memory abilities. Only older elementary school children seem to understand that some types of information are more easily remembered than others, and that memory strategies beyond rehearsal may be necessary for certain tasks (Wellman, 1985). Although memory skills themselves improve with age, increasing metamemorial knowledge of the difficulties of memory tasks and of memory limitations may result in self-doubt and the realization that others may question the veracity of children's memories of events.

Finally, there are many aspects of social development that may influence perceptions of credibility. For example, whereas younger children are often told simply to "tell the truth and you will be believed", older children probably "know better" than this, as they are more likely to have had experiences with telling the truth yet being suspected of lying. Older children probably are more aware of adult stereotypes or beliefs regarding children's and adult's tendencies to lie.

The Present Study

The present study was designed as an initial attempt to explore children's expectations of their own believability to

adults. Children were asked to evaluate their own credibility in both an actual and an hypothetical context. Motivational and cognitive aspects of children's reports of an event to which they were the only "witness" and the prime "suspect" were examined. Because the competency to testify of children younger than seven years of age has often been suspect (see Melton, 1981), and due to the aforementioned cognitive changes which occur around that same age, we chose to study children both below and above that age. We hypothesized that younger children would have higher (less realistic) expectations of their believability to adults than would older children. In addition, the possible relation of legal knowledge to believability perceptions was explored.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 67 children ranging in age from 2 years, 10 months to 10 years, 5 months. The children came primarily from middle and working class backgrounds. Sixteen of the children were black and 51 were white. Some children were recruited from an on-campus daycare facility; in other cases, parents enrolled in introductory psychology courses allowed their own children to participate in exchange for extra credit, or arranged for other children to participate. Permission letters fully explaining the study were signed by the parents or guardians of all these

children, and all were asked to refrain from discussing the study with their children until its conclusion. The study was conducted in a laboratory setting, and parents were invited to view the session through a one-way mirror.

The sample was divided into four age groups. The youngest group included 17 children ranging in age from 34 to 53 months (up to 4 1/2 years of age), with an average age of 3 years, 8 months (SD = 5.5 months). The second group consisted of 19 children whose ages' ranged from 55 to 74 months (up to 6 years, 2 months) and averaged 5 years, 4 months (SD = 6.4 months). The third group included 16 children ranging in age from 85 to 101 months (from approximately 7 to 8 1/2 years) with a mean age of 7 years, 8 months (SD = 5 months). The oldest group of 15 children ranged in age from 105 to 125 months (approximately 8 1/2 to 10 1/2 years), and averaged 9 years, 7 months (SD = 7 months).

Procedure

The children first participated in a test and play session with a female experimenter. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - Revised Edition (PPVT-R) was administered in standard fashion in order to ascertain each child's level of receptive vocabulary. This required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Additionally, the younger children were asked questions aimed at determining whether they understood the term believe. For example, the

experimenter asked, "Would you believe me if I said I had purple hair?".

Then a play session began, the purpose of which was explained as an effort to add to a collection of figures constructed from playdough. Four figures were displayed--an elephant, a turtle, a snake, and a fish--as illustrative of efforts to date. The child was told that Miss Smith, the "owner" of the collection, would really appreciate any contribution that he/she could make and would be in later to take the figures home. No more than 10 minutes into the session, the experimenter stated that she had to go "check on something" and that she would be "right back."

Meanwhile, a male assistant, whom the child had not previously met, entered the room carrying some books. He displayed great admiration for the work in progress and for that already completed by exclaiming, "Wow, that's really neat!" and made an effort to engage the child in conversation by enquiring as to the purpose of the child's efforts. The assistant then proceeded to "take a closer look at" the already completed figures by picking one of them up and "accidentally" broke the figure while examining it. Because the snake was the easiest to remake, this figure was always the one broken. After breaking the snake, the assistant left the room hurriedly, saying, "I'd better get out of here," and muttering to himself about the clumsiness of the

act. Upon leaving, the male assistant "forgot" his books and left them laying on the table where the child was playing. He was in the room with the child for two to three minutes.

After the male assistant left the room, the female experimenter re-entered and questioned the child as to what occurred while she was gone. The session was audiotaped from this point on. A semistructured interview was conducted with questions relevant to subsequent analysis completely standardized across subjects and including: "What happened to the snake?", "That's terrible what did you do?", and "Miss Smith is going to come in here in a minute, what are you going to tell her?". Children who did not answer the latter question at all (some of the younger children appeared to be frightened and would not even respond with "I don't know") or said that they weren't going to tell her anything were not questioned further by the first experimenter. Children who did answer this question were then asked: "Do you think she'll believe you?", "Would your mom believe you?", and "What about your Dad?". Children who indicated during earlier questioning that they did not understand the term <u>believe</u> (i.e., by answering "yes" to the experimenter's question regarding purple hair) were asked, "Do you think Miss Smith/ your mom/ your dad will think you're telling the truth or a lie?"

The owner of the collection then came in to meet the child

and take her animal figures home. Again, a semistructured format was used with relevant questions standardized across subjects and including: "What happened to the snake?", and, "That's terrible, what did you do?". If children indicated that someone had come in and broken the snake, they were then asked: "What did he (the assistant) look like?", "Where did he go?", and, "Do you think we can find him?"

Finally, children's understanding of legal concepts was assessed. A model courtroom (a shadowbox complete with figures of a judge, jury members, attorneys, plaintiff and defendant, witness, and audience) was used as a visual cue to aid children's responses. Children were first asked if they were familiar with each term (e.g., "Have you ever heard of a courtroom?"), while the experimenter pointed to the appropriate part of the model. If they indicated familiarity with any term, the experimenter then asked for a definition or description (e.g., "Tell me what a courtroom is or what happens in a courtroom"). In addition to the term courtroom, children were asked about the terms judge, jury, lawyer/attorney (they were asked both in case only one was familiar, and the best answer was used), and evidence (also asked as "How can you prove that someone did something wrong?", with the best answer used). Children who did not recognize or accurately describe judge or jury (see subsequent scoring procedures) were

asked to identify and describe policeman. Finally, children were asked, "If you told something to a judge and a grown-up told the judge something different, who do you think the judge would believe, you or the grown-up?". Children who lacked an understanding of the term judge were asked the same question with the term policeman substituted.

After this testing session was completed, the children were told that we really appreciated their help in adding to the collection, and that it didn't really matter about the snake being broken. The experimenter emphasized to the child that it was okay to tell how the snake had been broken, and that no one would get in trouble. The entire testing session required approximately 45 minutes.

Results

Coding and intercoder reliability

The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and responses to each open ended question were coded. The coding schemes were determined post hoc. For each question, three coders independently coded 20% of the transcripts. These 20% were representative of the four age groups, although the coders were blind to the children's ages. Intercoder agreement was calculated separately for each question, and ranged from 93% to 100%. After disagreements were discussed, all transcripts were coded by the

first author, to insure consistency. Specific coding schemes are reported subsequently with the corresponding questions.

Receptive vocabulary

The standard score equivalents (SSEs) for the PPVT-R for the four age groups were compared through analysis of variance in order to determine whether the children were both representative of the population and approximately equivalent to one another (when expected age differences were accounted for). The SSE for the general population is 100, and the average SSEs for the four groups in this study ranged from 90 to 100. No significant age differences were observed.

Event reports

Responses to the question, "What happened to the snake?," were divided into three categories: commission, omission, and accuracy. The majority of children in each age group reported accurately that someone had broken the snake. There were no significant age differences when a chi-square analysis was conducted on the percentages of children within each age group who reported accurately or made errors of omission or commission. Overall, 75% of the children responded accurately when initially asked by the experimenter to explain what happened. Typical accurate responses included that given by one 4-year-old, "Somebody broke that snake, he dropped it on the table and broke

it," and, from a 9-year-old, "A man just came in here...he sat down, we were talking, then I saw him drop that snake and it snapped." Children who did not respond accurately were overwhelmingly more likely to make errors of omission (e.g., "I don't know, it just broke") than of commission (e.g., "It fell off the table and broke all by itself", and one child who suggested that she was not even in the room when it happened). Approximately 21% of the children told the experimenter that they "didn't know" how the snake got broken, while only 4% actually made up a false version of what occurred.

The responses to the question, "What will you tell Miss Smith (the collection owner)?", were also coded as accurate, errors of omission, and errors of commission. A chi-square analysis revealed no significant age differences in the frequency of responses in these categories. Overall, 53% of the children said that they would tell Miss Smith that someone had come in and broken the snake. Forty-two percent said that they did not know what they would tell her, or that they would say they did not know what had happened. Only three of the children (5%) said that they would tell her something false--two 5-year-old children pointed to someone in the parking lot and accused them of breaking the snake, and one of the oldest children stated "I think we should just hide it and make her think it disappeared." When

analyzed by analysis of variance (where accurate reports received the highest scores and errors of commission the lowest), an age trend was observed, F (3,60) = 2.49, $p<.068$. Older children had higher scores than younger children (average scores were 1.6 for all three older groups and 1.1 for the youngest), indicating that older children were more likely to report accurately while younger children were more likely to say that they didn't know what had happened or what to tell Miss Smith.

In response to questioning by the owner of the collection, again 75% of the children were accurate, while 21% and 4% made errors of omission and commission, respectively. However, there was a trend ($p<.08$) for an age difference in this analysis, χ^2 (6, N=67) = 11.16. None of the children in the older two groups made errors of commission. Even the child who had suggested hiding the broken snake, and who in fact did hide it, showed Miss Smith where it was hidden and accurately reported how it had been broken. Twelve percent of the 3 to 4 1/2-year-olds and 5% of the 4 1/2- to 6-year-olds made errors of commission. Errors of omission were made by 35%, 21%, 0, and 27% of the children, from youngest to oldest. Finally, accuracy ranged from 53% for the youngest group to 100% for the 7- to 8 1/2-year-olds.

Whereas some of the children had to be prompted to tell us what occurred in the experimenter's absence, others immediately

volunteered an explanation both initially to the experimenter and later to the collection owner. Spontaneous responses were not related to age in a chi-square analysis but were significantly related to the type of response the child gave (commission, omission, accuracy). Twenty-eight children spontaneously reported the event to the experimenter, and, of these, 93% reported accurately, 4% made errors of omission, and 3% made errors of commission. The 39 children who did not respond spontaneously were accurate only 62% of the time with 33% making errors of omission, and 5% making errors of commission, χ^2 (2, N=67) = 9.14, $p<.01$. Spontaneity was similarly related to children's subsequent explanations to the owner of the collection, χ^2 (2, N=67) = 5.9, $p<.05$.

Expectations of believability

For the question, "Do you think Miss Smith will believe you?," children responded in one of three ways, "yes", "I don't know", or "no". All of the 3- to 4 1/2-year-olds thought the owner of the collection would believe their story about how the figure was broken, while 86% of the 4 1/2- to 6-year-olds did. Fifty-four percent of the 7- to 8 1/2-year-olds thought the owner would believe them, while only 42% of the oldest children thought they would be believed, χ^2 (6,N=50) = 15.69, $p<.02$. The remainder of the children in each age group reported that they did not know

if Miss Smith would believe their story, with the exception of two children (one 4 1/2- to 6-year-old and one 7- to 8 1/2-year-old) who said that they definitely would not be believed. These data were also analyzed by analysis of variance, with age as the grouping variable, and believability score as the dependent measure (a yes answer received two points, uncertain received one, and no received zero). Age differences were significant, F (3,46) = 3.27, $p<.03$), with Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons indicating that the older two groups expected to be believed less than the younger two groups did (see Table 1). Moreover, children who spontaneously reported what happened to the broken snake had greater confidence in their believability to the collection owner, χ^2 (2, N=50) = 6.6, $p<.05$. The percentage of "spontaneous" children (n=23) responding "yes," "don't know," or "no" to the question of whether or not they would be believed was 87, 9, and 4, respectively. Only 56% of the "nonspontaneous" children (n=27) responded "yes," 41% said "I don't know," and 4% said "no."

Insert Table 1 About Here

Age differences were not significant in chi-square or analyses of variance for the questions, "Do you think your mother would believe you?," and "What about your father?". Overall,

almost 78% of the children felt their mothers would believe them, whereas 10% were unsure and 12% said no. Fewer children felt their fathers would believe them, although the majority (58%) still answered the question affirmatively, while 13% were unsure and the remainder (29%) answered negatively. Neither were there any age differences in responses to the question concerning whether a judge/policeman would believe the child or an adult. Overall, 42% of the children thought the adult would be believed, 19% were uncertain, and 39% thought they would be believed over an adult. Even if an affirmative response bias was operating for the question about the collection owner (all the youngest children responded "yes"), it is clear that no such bias, nor any recency effect, was operating here.

Chi-square analysis did reveal significant age differences for the question, "Why would a judge (policeman) believe your (or the adult's) story?," χ^2 (9, N=51) = 21.5, $p<.01$. The majority of children in the younger two groups said, "I don't know" (75% and 67%) or credited the judge (policeman) with powers of omniscience (25% and 13%) by saying, for example, "They just know...they can look and tell who's lying." While some (29% and 21%) of the older children also said they did not know what would make one person more believable than another, they were more likely to give responses based on their perceptions of adult versus child

characteristics (57% of each older group). Common responses included: I will be believed because "grown-ups often lie," or the adult will be believed because "grown-ups know more than kids, they go to school longer." None of the younger children, and few of those in the two older groups (7% and 21% respectively) mentioned other factors that might influence the perceived credibility of their statements. For example, one 7-year-old stated that "whoever's got the best clues" will be believed.

To determine whether children's expectations of believability significantly differed across the four adults about whom they were questioned (collection owner, mother, father, judge/policeman), a repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted with age as the grouping measure and believability ratings for the various adults as a within subject factor. The youngest two and oldest two age groups were pooled for this analysis, as only six of the youngest children had answers for all four questions (due to the fact that children who either did not understand believe or answered "I don't know" to the question "What happened to the snake" were not questioned further regarding believability). For the questions concerning mother, father, and collection owner, positive responses received two points, uncertainty received one point, and negative responses zero points. For the question regarding the judge's tendency to believe an adult or the child,

children answering that they would be believed received two points, uncertainty again received one point, and answers that the adult would be believed received no points. There was no significant age effect, nor did age interact with type of adult. However, the type of adult had a significant effect on children's expectations of believability, F (3,126) = 9.11, p<.0001. According to a Tukey's HSD post hoc test, children felt that the collection owner and their mothers would be significantly more likely to believe them than would a judge, and the children's responses for father fell in between (see Table 2). Considering that the question regarding the judge was the only one that required children to compare their believability to an adult's, it is not surprising that their expectations of credibility were lower than for the other questions.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Finally, we constructed an overall believability scale, which involved adding the children's scores for each of the four questions. A total score of eight was possible. Although the means for this total score decreased predictably with age (6.0, 5.9, 5.4, and 5.2, respectively, from youngest to oldest), the age effect was not significant. We reran the analysis pooling the

youngest two and oldest two age groups (due to the small cell sizes in the prior analysis). The mean believability score for the older group was 5.3, and for the younger group was 5.9, but again the age effect was not significant.

Corroborating "evidence"

Analyses revealed that children's ability to provide corroborating evidence in support of their stories was also significantly related to age, with older children being much more likely to adequately describe the perpetrator when asked, and to spontaneously mention that he left his books behind. Only 12% of the youngest children mentioned the books, whereas 37% of the 4 1/2- to 6-year-olds, 69% of the 7- to 8 1/2-year-olds, and 57% of the 8 1/2- to 10-year-olds did, χ^2 (3, N=66) =12.57, $p<.006$. In addition, children who did mention the books often did so repeatedly. For example, one 9-year-old boy responded to the question "What happened to Miss Smith's snake?" by saying "A man came in. Those are his books. He picked up that thing and it broke". When asked what he would tell Miss Smith, he responded "The truth, I'll just tell her the truth". And when asked "Do you think she'll believe you?", he answered, "Sure. See the books? I've got evidence". Some of the children even suggested that we look in the books to find the name of the man who left them.

Children's descriptions of the "perpetrator" were coded in

two ways. First, we examined how accurate and specific the description was. If a description was totally inaccurate, or if the child did not provide one when asked, it was rated as a zero. If the description was accurate, but very general (and thus of little help in finding or identifying the "suspect") it was rated as a one. For example, some children simply suggested "he had on some pants and a shirt". If a description contained reference to the man's clothing, and was more specific (e.g., "he had on Nikes" or "he had on some jeans and a white shirt"), it was given a rating of two. It should be noted that the assistant did not wear the same clothing at each session; however, he did consistently wear the same "type" of clothing (jeans or shorts, t-shirt, tennis shoes) so we were able to decipher general accuracy. Finally, if the description was accurate and specific regarding features of the man himself rather than his clothing (e.g., "he had curly hair and freckles"), it was given the highest possible score of three, as provision of such physical features would be more helpful in identifying a suspect than descriptions of (changeable) clothing.

An analysis of variance was conducted, with age as the grouping factor and description ranking as the dependent measure. A significant effect of age was observed, F (3,63) = 38.13, $p<.0001$. However, it should be noted that the average scores for the younger two groups were both zero (and thus SDs were also

zero), making the analysis inappropriate, and unnecessary. The oldest group averaged 1.93 (SD=1.1), and their slightly younger peers scored 2.19 (SD=1.2), but these means were not significantly different from one another, according to Tukey's HSD post hoc tests. Further chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences among the two older age groups. Fifty-two percent of the older children mentioned at least one specific, accurate physical characteristic, 19% described specific items of clothing, 13% were only very general in their descriptions, and the remainder (16%) provided no description or inaccurate descriptions.

We then examined how elaborate children's descriptions of the perpetrator were. Again, children who could not provide a description at all received the lowest rating (zero), those who accurately described only his clothing received scores of one, accurate descriptions only of physical features received scores of two, whereas accurate descriptions including both clothing and physical features received the highest rating (three). An analysis of variance revealed a significant age effect, F (3,63) = 36.8, $p<.00001$. However, the younger two groups of children again had zero averages, while the average for the next group was 1.81 (SD=.98), and for the oldest was 1.93 (SD=1.16). The older two age groups were not significantly different from one another,

according to Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons. A chi-square analysis comparing the older two age groups also revealed no significant differences. Overall, 32% of the older children mentioned both clothing and physical features in their descriptions, 39% mentioned only physical features, 13% mentioned only clothing, and the remainder (16%) were inaccurate.

Legal knowledge

Responses to legal knowledge questions were coded in two ways, for recognition and adequacy of description. For each term, if children indicated in any way that they were familiar with the concept (e.g., "I saw it on the muppet show"), they were given one point; children indicating that they were not familiar received zero points. Children reporting familiarity with a term were then asked to provide to the best of their ability some description of the function or purpose of e.g., a judge, and so on. Responses were then coded according to a system developed by Saywitz (1989), who had adults describe legal terms, then determine whether features were simply characteristically associated with the concept or critical to its definition. For example, characteristic features of a judge might be, "he hammers on the desk" and "he wears a long dress", whereas the defining feature for judges is expressed in this response, "they decide something, like if someone has broken a law or something". If no description

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was given, or if that description was inaccurate, it was assigned a zero score. As noted in previous research (e.g., Saywitz, 1989; Warren-Leubecker, et al., 1989), younger children sometimes assumed an unfamiliar word such as jury to mean something familiar and described legal terms in a nonlegal context. This remained true even with the use of visual cues to aid the children's responses. For example, one 3-year-old boy stated of a jury, "It's gold, a ring, bracelet or something." Characteristic descriptions received one point, while defining descriptions received two points. Intercoder agreement, determined as reported previously, was 96%.

Two scales were then constructed based on children's answers to the five questions concerning court, judge, jury, lawyer/attorney, and evidence/proof. A legal familiarity score was obtained by simply adding the number of terms with which the child was familiar, so scores ranged from zero to five. The legal knowledge scale consisted of adding the children's description scores for each of the five questions, which ranged from zero to two for each question, so that legal knowledge total scores ranged from zero to ten.

An analysis of variance was conducted with age as the grouping variable and the legal familiarity score as the dependent measure, and yielded a significant age effect, F (3,62) = 29.9,

$p<.0001$. Older children had significantly higher familiarity scores, and post hoc comparisons indicated that all four age groups' average scores were significantly different from one another (see Table 3). Using the legal knowledge scale as the dependent measure, another analysis of variance was conducted and a significant age effect was again observed, F (3,62) =25.6, $p<.0001$. Older children provided significantly better definitions than did younger children, but post hoc comparisons indicated that the two youngest groups of children were not significantly different (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 About Here

Because a child could conceivably score e.g., four points on the legal knowledge scale either by answering four questions with characteristic features or two questions with defining features, we conducted further fine-grained chi-square analyses on the frequency with which children provided various levels of description for each question. None of the children in either of the two younger groups were able to provide defining features for the terms court, jury, lawyer, or evidence, and only one young child provided a defining feature for judge. Most gave no description whatsoever, although a few did provide characteristic

features in their definitions (most frequently for the terms judge and evidence).

The answers to the question concerning evidence/proof were of most interest as they may relate to children's understanding of credibility. Only one of the youngest children even recognized the term, and provided a characteristic feature in the subsequent description. Seven of the 4 1/2- to 6-year-olds indicated recognition, and two of these provided no description while the other five gave characteristic responses. Of the six children in the 7 to 8 1/2-year-old range who recognized the term, four provided defining features and two gave characteristic features. Lastly, 13 of the oldest children were familiar with the term, and 12 of these provided defining features in their descriptions. Characteristic definitions most frequently involved what we called "omniscience", in that children appeared to believe judges or policemen always know when one is telling the truth (e.g., "they can just look and tell who's lying"). Defining descriptions included, "like fingerprints", and, "if someone tried to break in a window, and it shut on their finger and mashed it off, that would be evidence".

Finally, younger children were additionally asked, "What is a policeman and what does a policeman do?" Thirty-two of the 3-to-6-year-olds indicated familiarity with the term policeman.

Forty-four percent of the children provided either no or inaccurate descriptions (e.g., "spanks you and puts you in your car-seat"), 12% mentioned a characteristic feature ("his car goes 'woo woo'"), and 44% said that a policeman "arrests you" and "puts bad people in jail."

Relations between dependent measures

In order to examine the relationship between children's legal knowledge, receptive vocabulary scores, and expectations of believability, correlational analyses were performed. Receptive vocabulary standard scores (controlling for age) on the PPVT-R were significantly ($p<.01$) correlated with legal familiarity and legal knowledge($r=.39,.32$, respectively), but were not at all related to believability ($r=.00$). Neither legal knowledge nor legal familiarity were significantly related to believability even before their covariations due to age were removed ($r=-.10,-.18$, respectively). As a result, there was no indication that legal knowledge and credibility perceptions were related as speculated in previous research (e.g., Warren-Leubecker et al., 1989). However, the younger children's mean scores for reported familiarity and accuracy of description were quite low. This possible floor effect and the restricted range of legal knowledge scores within the younger groups may have contributed to the null relationship found between credibility perceptions and legal

knowledge.

Discussion

The results indicate that children's expectations that they will be believed by unfamiliar adults decrease with age. While all of the 3 to 4 1/2-year-olds thought the owner of the collection would believe their report of how one of her figures came to be broken (said she would think they were "telling the truth"), less than half of the 8 1/2-to-10-year-olds were certain they would be believed. Additionally, while age differences were not significant, a greater percentage of the younger children than older children were certain that their "story" would be believed (by an hypothetical judge/policeman) over that given by an adult.

While any interpretation of these results must be tentative, younger and older children's reasoning in response to the question, "Why would a judge/policeman be more likely to believe you or an adult?", may provide a plausible explanation. The majority of younger children credited the judge/policeman (and possibly adults in general) with powers of omniscience and faithfully assumed that an adult authority figure could "just look and tell who's lying" and if you "just tell the truth they will believe you." As reported, most of the children in each age group did tell the truth (accurately report what had happened). Perhaps the younger children confused their own perspective with

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that of the judge, and the collection owner - feeling that if they themselves know they are telling the truth, then obviously others automatically know so too. Conversely, older children were more likely to realize that "it could go either way" and to mention factors that influence credibility perhaps based on their own subjective experience (e.g., the grown-up will be believed because "they're bigger and smarter," or I will be believed because "grown-ups lie more"). Children's past experiences in situations in which their believability has been questioned, and other factors that may be related to self-perceptions of believability including self-esteem, personality variables, birth order and number of siblings, parental discipline, and parental attitudes toward lying are important questions for future research.

Additionally, it was hypothesized that children having doubts about their own credibility might change details of their report of an event to make it seem more believable or fail to report a "crime," particularly one to which they are the sole witness. The latter possibility seems to be the most likely. While the majority of children in each age group told the truth about how the figure was broken, children who did not accurately report the event were overwhelmingly more likely to deny knowing what happened than to actively formulate a false story. It is possible that the younger children simply do not have the cognitive or

linguistic abilities to fabricate a convincing story, making denial a more effective strategy by default (e.g., Tate, Warren, & Hess, in press). Ekman (1989) reports that denials are among the earliest lies to emerge. This result is also consistent with Piaget's (1932/65) finding that young children believe a lie is worse if you tell "lots of things...not just one sentence, but a long one" (p. 153). Children who did not want to tell us what happened may have been less willing (rather than less able) to make up an elaborate story to explain the event, because simply saying, "I don't know," was, in their perception, a less serious offense. Thus, although older children, particularly, had concerns regarding their credibility, they typically did not attempt to alleviate their concerns by either exaggerating the actual event or creating a false version.

Consistent with the results of several previous studies on the development of legal knowledge (e.g, Saywitz, 1989; Warren-Leubecker et al., 1989), children younger than the age of 7-years-old had little familiarity with legal terms and even less understanding of the concepts. Only the older children provided descriptions of the terms which included the central, defining features. Not surprisingly, children with larger receptive vocabularies also had greater abilities to define these legal terms, even when age was controlled. However, there was no

support in the results of this study for the hypothesis that increasing legal knowledge, rather than age per se, is responsible for changes in expectations of believability, as correlations between legal knowledge and believability were nonsignificant. Given the restricted range of legal knowledge observed in this study, however, further study of larger samples will be needed to determine the true relation of legal knowledge to expectations of credibility.

As noted, only 12% and 37% of the 3 to 4 1/2 and 4 1/2 to 6-year-olds mentioned the books left behind by the perpetrator, and none could or would accurately describe him. However, it is difficult to discern whether younger children's failures to mention the books and give a description of the perpetrator were due to a deficiency in attending to or encoding this information or, because they did not understand the implications of reporting this kind of information. If younger children really assumed that the collection owner would "just know" that their report of the event was accurate, they may not have considered this kind of information important enough to mention. Moreover, studies of children's free reports of events indicate that young children will volunteer much less information than they actually know and that they may have to be asked specific and even leading questions before they will divulge it (Cole & Loftus, 1987).

In fact, many of the children's parents reported to us that children who initially had denied knowing what happened later reported the event accurately to them and accurately described the "perpetrator". Considering that many of children appeared to feel that their mothers would be more likely to believe them (than an hypothetical judge/policeman), it is not surprising that they divulged more information to their parents. Further, a certain amount of stress (particularly for the younger children) resulting from the fact that the children were the only "witnesses" to, and by association the "prime suspects" in the incident may have contributed to their original tendency to simply say, "I don't know," when asked to explain what had happened. According to Yamamoto (1979), children rate being suspected of lying as one of their most stressful experiences. Goodman, Aman, and Hirschman (1987) did not find any effect of stress on children's recall of an event or ability to identify a "suspect" in a photo lineup even after a 7 to 9 day delay. However, in a study by Peters (in press), children witnessed a "theft" and were asked soon after to identify the suspect in a live lineup. Fifty-eight percent of the children falsely stated that the man was not present in the lineup. Their parents later reported that the children had recognized the "thief" but had been afraid to identify him because something "bad might happen" or "someone would get into trouble."

Another interesting finding was that children who spontaneously reported to the experimenter what had happened in her absence (without being asked) were much more likely to report accurately (or truthfully). Children who had to be questioned about the event were more likely to make errors of omission or commission. This result lends some credence to the "res gestae" or "excited utterances" exception to the hearsay rule, which holds that such statements are "presumptively reliable". In other words, if a child makes a spontaneous out of court statement in close time to the event and while still startled or excited by the event, one may infer reliability because the child is unlikely to have had sufficient time either to forget or to gather his/her wits enough to fabricate (McGough, in press).

Taken together, results of the present study suggest that children's potential as witnesses is evaluated by children themselves in much the same way as it is by adults. As previously noted, much of what determines a child's perceived credibility may depend on socially accepted stereotypes of children's cognitive abilities and trustworthiness. In general, adults give less weight to children's testimony when cognitive aspects (e.g., ability to accurately describe an assailant) are the primary issue and more weight to a child's testimony when motivational components are the key issue (e.g., lying to cover up for a

friend). The children in this study echoed these stereotypes in regard to their expectations of their credibility in the eyes of adults. All of the children who stated that their hypothetical testimony (relative to an adult's) would be more believable indicated that this was because children were more honest than adults (e.g., "grown-ups often lie," "I don't tell lies, grown-ups do"). On the other hand, most children who said that an hypothetical judge/policeman would be more likely to believe an adult's testimony indicated that this was because of the adult's superior cognitive abilities (e.g., "little children can't explain things," "the grown-up is bigger and knows what happened and little kids don't").

While the children's perceptions of their own believability (positive or negative) in the eyes of adults did not seem to have any effect on their subsequent reporting of events (even children who had real concerns about their credibility still recounted the event accurately), there is reason to suspect that these perceptions may well have an effect on their courtroom performance. If children are laboring under the assumptions of "they know I'm honest" or "I'm just a kid, adults are smarter, so they'll believe them and not me," they may respond to legal questioning with only minimal effort and little detail. In other words, children may not relate all that they know (or provide

evidence to corroborate their stories), because they may either assume that it is a "given" that they are telling the truth or that no amount of evidence is going to make their testimony more believable relative to an adult's.

Obviously, children's changing cognitive capacities, including their understanding of legal concepts, concepts of "truth" and "lying", perspective-taking abilities and metacognitive skills (e.g., estimations of their own memory and expressive language capacities) may affect their perceptions of their own credibility. So too, will social factors, such as attitudes toward authority, and experiences with lying and being suspected of lying. Thus, while the present research indicates a developmental change in children's expectations of their believability to adults, the origins of these expectations and the extent to which the pattern of these findings generalizes to other children and situations remains for further investigation.

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Table 1

Responses to "Will the collection owner believe you?" by Age Group

		Responses				
	Scores:	2	1	0		
Age	n	Yes	Unknown	No	Mean	(SD)
3 to 4 1/2	10	100%	0%	0%	2.00	(0.0)
4 1/2 to 6	15	86%	7%	7%	1.80	(.56)
7 to 8 1/2	13	54%	38%	8%	1.46	(.66)
8 1/2 to 10	12	42%	58%	0%	1.42	(.51)

Note. Differences in means greater than .278 are significant ($p<.05$) according to Tukey's HSD test.

Table 2

Mean Expectations of Believability to Different Adults

			Adult			
			Owner	Mother	Father	Judge [1]
Child Age	n					
3 to 6 years	21	M =	1.86	1.67	1.24	1.14
		SD =	(.48)	(.73)	(.94)	(.91)
7 to 10 years	23		1.48	1.65	1.39	.78
			(.59)	(.64)	(.84)	(.90)

Note. Highest believability score is 2. Mean differences greater than .408 are significant at $p<.05$ according to Tukey's HSD test.

[1] The term policeman was substituted for some younger children.

Table 3

Mean Legal Familiarity and Legal Knowledge Scores by Age

		Familiarity [a]		Knowledge [b]	
Age	n	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
3 to 4 1/2	17	.35	(.49)	.06	(.24)
4 1/2 to 6	19	1.47	(1.5)	.68	(1.2)
7 to 8 1/2	15	2.73	(1.7)	3.13	(2.8)
8 1/2 to 10	15	4.33	(.98)	5.93	(3.2)

Note. [a] Maximum score of 5. Mean differences greater than .58 are significant at $p<.05$, according to Tukey's HSD test.

[b] Maximum score of 10. Mean differences greater than .97 are significant at $p<.05$, according to Tukey's HSD test.